

# Foreign Language Teaching in U.S. Schools

## Results of a National Survey



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2008, in collaboration with Westat, a statistical survey research organization, and with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's International Research and Studies Program, the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) conducted a nationwide survey of elementary and secondary schools to collect detailed information on foreign language education in the United States. The goal of the survey was to identify current patterns and shifts over time in five key areas: amount of foreign language instruction in schools, languages and types of programs offered, foreign language curriculum, teacher certification and professional development, and effects of education reform on language instruction. During the 2007–2008 school year, principals, foreign language teachers, and department chairs from a nationally representative sample of more than 5,000 public and private schools completed CAL's four-page survey.

The 2008 survey results complement and enhance the field's existing knowledge base regarding foreign language instruction and enrollment in the United States. The full report of the survey offers comparisons of the 2008 data with data collected by CAL in its two previous national sur-

veys, conducted in 1987 and 1997. This summary presents highlights of the 2008 survey results.

### Amount of Language Instruction

The percentage of elementary and middle schools offering foreign language instruction decreased significantly from 1997 to 2008: from 31% to 25% of all elementary schools (Figure 1) and from 75% to 58% of all middle schools. The decline at the elementary level occurred mainly in public elementary schools; the percentage of private elementary schools teaching languages remained about the same. The percentage of high schools teaching foreign languages stayed relatively steady at about 91% (Figure 2). Only a small percentage of the schools not teaching languages in 2008 expressed an interest in offering languages in the next 2 years: 8% of elementary schools and 17% of secondary schools.

Survey results revealed issues of unequal access to foreign language instruction. Schools in rural areas and schools whose students were of lower socioeconomic status (SES) were less likely

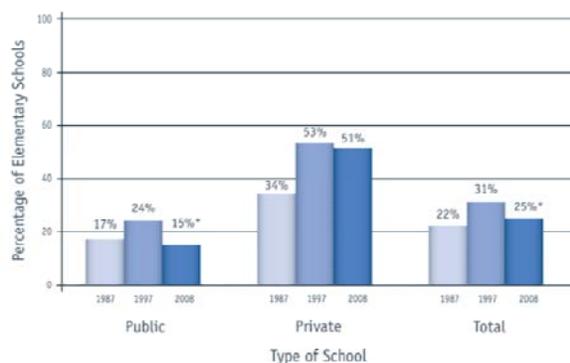


Figure 1. Elementary Schools Teaching Foreign Languages (by School Type) (1987, 1997, 2008).

\*A statistically significant decrease from 1997 to 2008.

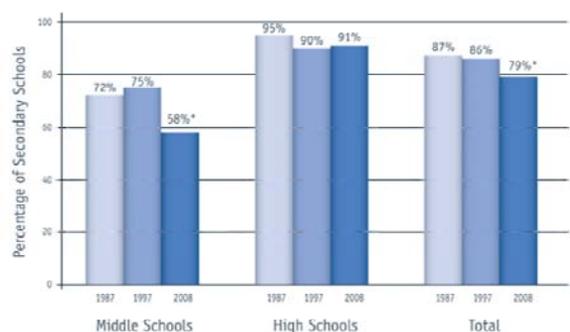


Figure 2. Secondary Schools Teaching Foreign Languages (by School Level) (1987, 1997, 2008).

Note: The majority of middle schools in the sample were public schools.

\*A statistically significant decrease from 1997 to 2008.

to offer foreign language classes. In addition, the percentage of private elementary schools offering foreign language instruction (51%) was more than three times that of public elementary schools (15%).

## Languages, Program Types, and Scheduling

Among the schools that offered languages, Spanish remained the most commonly taught language. In fact, in these schools Spanish increased significantly at the elementary level (from 79% of schools with language programs in 1997 to 88% in 2008) and remained stable (93%) in secondary schools (Figures 3 and 4). (However, because the percentage of schools with foreign language programs declined at the elementary and middle

school levels, so did Spanish offerings overall.) The teaching of French and German, however, saw significant declines at both levels. French decreased from 27% to 11% of schools with language programs at the elementary level and from 64% to 46% at the secondary level. German decreased from 5% to 2% at the elementary level and from 24% to 14% at the secondary level.

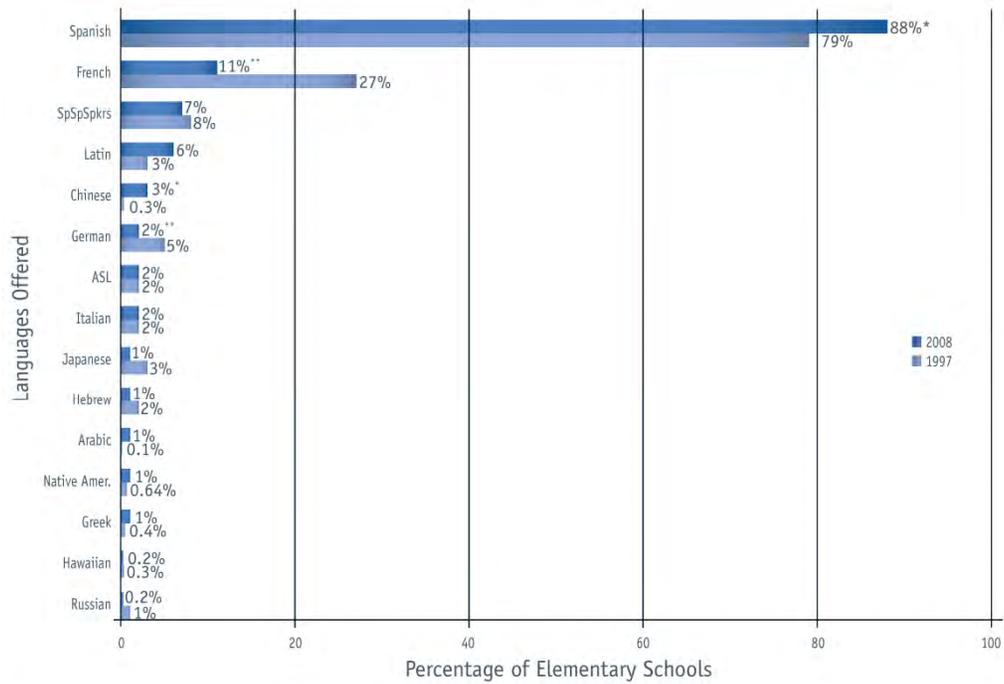
The percentage of schools offering Chinese and Arabic, although still low, increased at both the elementary and secondary levels. In 2008, Chinese was taught at 3% of elementary schools and 4% of secondary schools with language programs. The percentages for Arabic were 1% for elementary schools and 0.6% for secondary schools. Latin was down at the secondary level (from 20% to 13%) but rose at the elementary level (from 3% to 6%). The teaching of Russian and Japanese decreased at both levels.

Among public elementary schools, the most commonly offered foreign language program was the exploratory model (offered by 47% of public elementary schools with language programs), which provides introductory exposure to the language. Language focus programs, which emphasize listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture, were offered at 39% of public elementary schools with language programs (Figure 5). These programs may or may not expect students to gain proficiency in the language, depending on the goals of the particular program. The remaining 14% of programs followed an immersion model, which provides students the opportunity to attain high levels of proficiency in the target language.

Most secondary schools with language programs (95%) offered standard classes with instruction in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture. The percentage of secondary schools offering Advanced Placement (AP) language classes increased significantly—from 12% in 1987 to 16% in 1997 to 21% in 2008.

## Curriculum and Instruction

As was true in past surveys, the vast majority of secondary school language programs reported having an established foreign language curriculum. At the elementary school level, the percentage of elementary school language programs with an established curriculum increased gradually over 20 years, from 64% in 1987 to 78% in 2008.

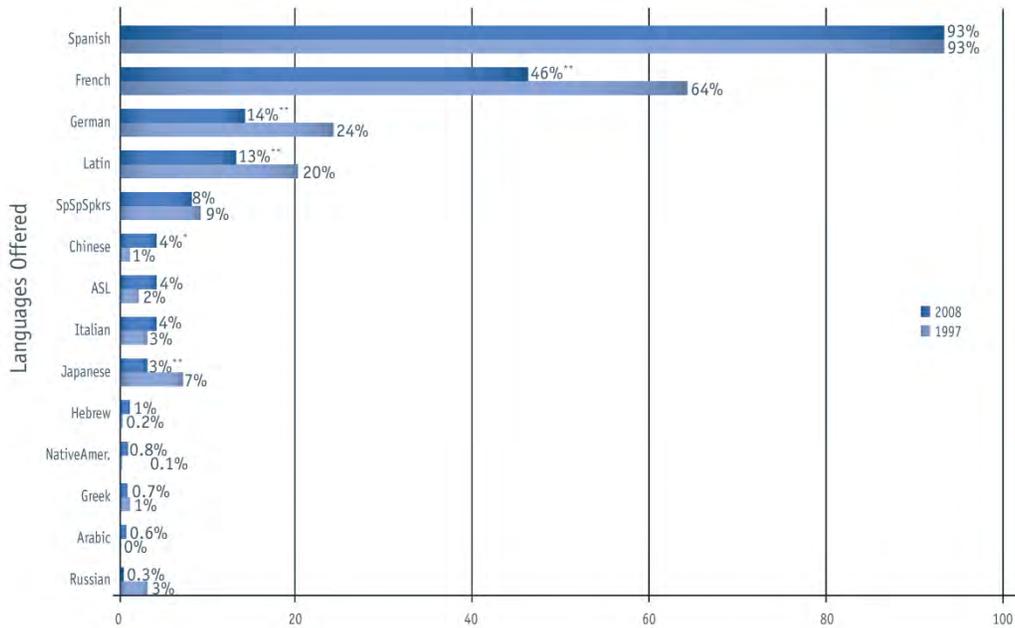


**Figure 3.** Languages Offered by Elementary Schools With Foreign Language Programs (1997, 2008).

Note. SpSpSpkrs = Spanish for Spanish speakers; ASL = American Sign Language. Native Amer. = Native American languages.

\* Indicates a statistically significant increase from 1997 to 2008.

\*\* Indicates a statistically significant decrease from 1997 to 2008.

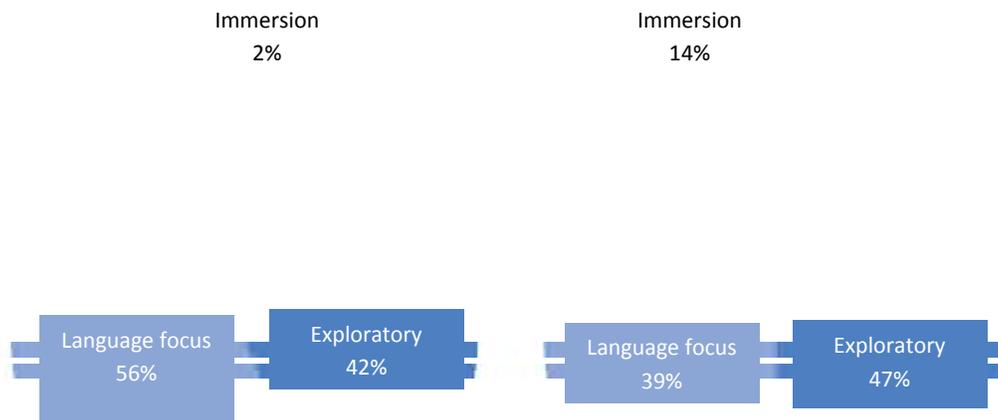


**Figure 4.** Languages Offered by Secondary Schools With Foreign Language Programs (1997, 2008).

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**Figure 5.** Elementary School Foreign Language Program Types (by School Type) (2008).

The use of literature from the target culture increased significantly at both the elementary and secondary levels from 1997 to 2008. There was also a noticeable increase in the use of technology-based instructional materials.

The use of Internet resources tripled at the elementary level and doubled at the secondary level, and the use of computer-assisted instructional materials and other instructional technology (e.g., satellite broadcasts, interactive television, video conferencing) increased significantly at both levels.

Survey results revealed an increase by both elementary and secondary schools in the use of proficiency-oriented assessments, including oral presentations, oral interviews, and student portfolios. There was also an increase at both levels in the use of student self-assessments, in which students take an active role in monitoring their language development.

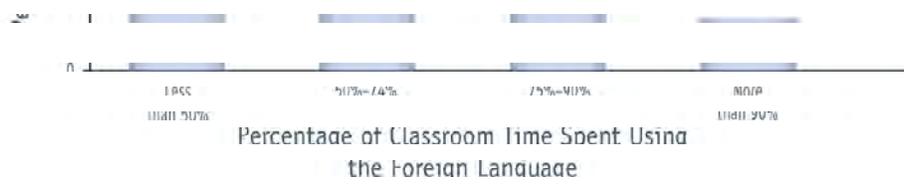
Teachers in 2008 reported using the foreign language in the classroom more than they did in 1997. About one third of elementary and secondary schools with language programs reported that their teachers used the target language in class at least 75% of the time. In 1997, the percentage for secondary school teachers was only 22% (Figures

6 and 7). (Elementary schools were not asked the question in 1997.)

Only 39% of elementary schools with language programs reported some type of articulation from elementary to middle school foreign language instruction. A higher percentage of high schools—59% of those whose students had studied a language in middle school—reported having an articulated sequence of instruction from middle school to high school (Figure 8). This was a notable increase from 24% in 1997.

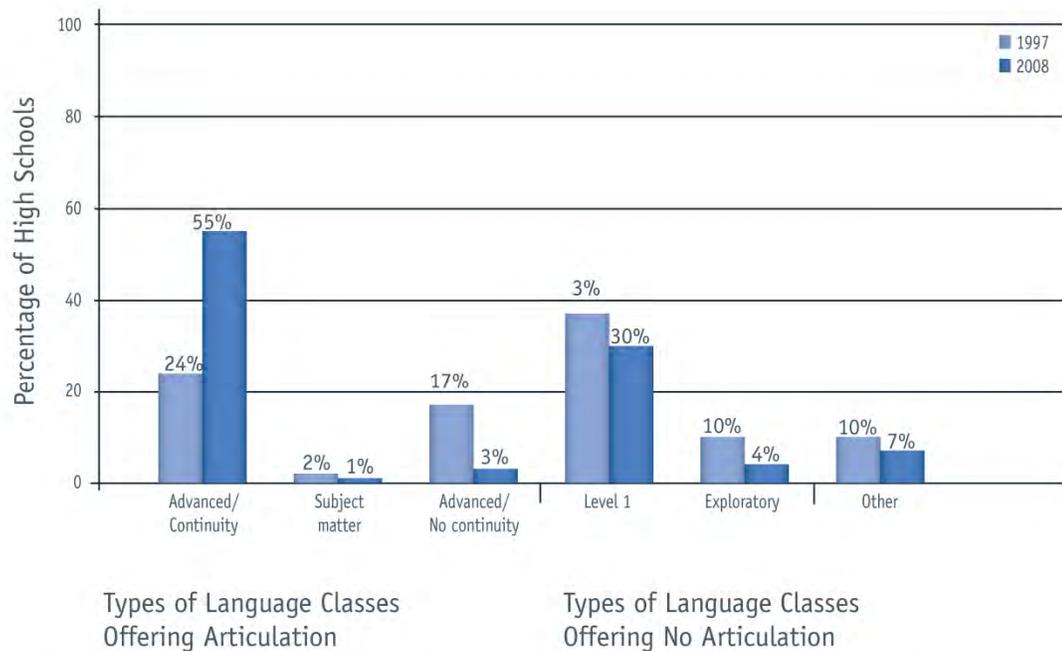
## Foreign Language Teachers

More than one quarter of all elementary school foreign language teachers are not certified at all. The percentage of elementary schools that reported having uncertified language teachers increased from 17% in 1997 to 31% in 2008. At the same time, the percentage of schools that reported having at least one teacher with K-12 foreign language teacher certification increased from 19% to 34%, and the percentage reporting at least one teacher with elementary foreign language teacher certification increased from 19% to 24%. At the secondary school level, the over-



**Figure 6.** Elementary Teachers' Use of the Foreign Language in Non-Immersion Foreign Language Classes (2008).

Figure 7.



**Figure 8.** Patterns for Articulation From Middle School to High School Language Study (1997, 2008).

whelming majority of schools reported that their language teachers were certified, with 77% holding a secondary-level foreign language teaching certificate and 44% holding a K-12 foreign language teaching certificate. (Some teachers held more than one type of certificate.)

Although most schools at both levels reported that their teachers had engaged in subject-specific professional development within the previous year (63% elementary, 73% secondary), the level of participation at both levels was unchanged from 1997 to 2008. There was a significant disparity between rural schools and urban and suburban schools. Teachers in rural schools had a much lower rate of participation in professional development.

One quarter (25%) of elementary schools and nearly one third (30%) of secondary schools offering languages reported being affected by a shortage of qualified language teachers. The schools most affected were elementary schools in rural areas and elementary and secondary schools

with a large percentage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Educational Reform

At both the elementary and secondary levels, the percentage of schools whose language teachers incorporated national or state standards into their instruction almost tripled from 1997 to 2008. Standards use increased from 25% to 76% in public elementary schools and from 31% to 89% in public secondary schools.

Approximately one third of public elementary and secondary schools with language programs reported that their foreign language instruction had been affected by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education legislation. Comments from survey respondents suggested that NCLB's focus on mathematics and reading instruction had drawn resources away from foreign languages because they are not included in the law's accountability measures.

## Conclusion

The profile of foreign language instruction in the United States revealed by the 2008 survey shows that foreign language instruction remained relatively stable at the high school level from 1997 to 2008 but that it decreased substantially in elementary and middle schools. Moreover, only a small percentage of the elementary and middle schools not teaching languages in 2008 planned to implement a language program within the next 2 years.

Survey data revealed a number of other disturbing trends:

- There were inequities in access to foreign language education. Languages were offered in smaller percentages of rural schools and schools whose students were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The teaching of French, German, Japanese, and Russian decreased at both the elementary and secondary levels.
- Nearly one third of public elementary and secondary schools with language programs reported that language teaching had been negatively affected by NCLB.
- The disparity between public and private elementary school language offerings increased exponentially, with private schools offering languages at much higher rates.
- The shortage of language teachers was so severe that some schools were seeking alternative sources of teachers, such as agencies that provide teachers from other countries, commercial language schools, and foreign governments that send teachers to the United States.

Some positive trends are also evident from the survey results:

- The teaching of Arabic and Chinese increased at both the elementary and secondary levels.
- Language teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels were integrating national and

state language standards into their teaching more than they did a decade earlier and using the target language in the classroom more frequently.

- There were pockets of innovation—in particular, immersion programs where elementary schools offered language instruction resulting in high levels of proficiency.
- More language classes were using authentic literature from the target culture than before.
- The use of technology-based materials—Internet resources, computer-assisted instructional materials, instructional technology—increased significantly.
- Both elementary and secondary schools continued to offer language classes for native speakers—mostly in Spanish, but in some other languages as well.

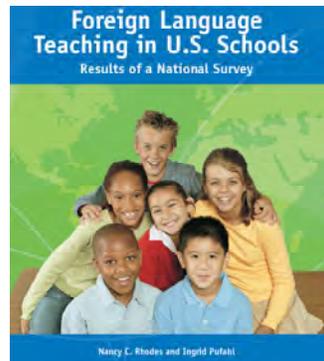
Unfortunately, the overall picture of foreign language instruction in 2008 was no better—and in some areas worse—than in 1997. There continues to be reason for serious concern about the limited number of long-sequence K–12 language programs designed to provide students with the linguistic and cultural skills needed to communicate effectively in the United States and abroad. In addition, the gap has widened between the haves and the have-nots. A large number of elementary and middle school students in this country, especially those in rural or low SES schools, do not have the opportunity to study foreign language at all.

It is time for all Americans to recognize the vital importance of an American citizenry that can communicate effectively in many languages and across cultures, and for schools to make the teaching and learning of foreign languages a priority in the K–12 curriculum. When legislators, administrators, and other education policy makers recognize the need to incorporate foreign languages into the core curriculum, the necessary funding and other resources will follow. This change in attitude is the necessary first step in moving our country toward parity with nations around the globe that graduate students who can communicate in more than one language.

Communicating in more than one language is vitally important in the interconnected world of the 21st century. There is growing awareness in the United States that creating a multilingual society is critical to our economic success, national security, and international relations. Promoting the teaching and learning of languages is a key component. How well are U.S. schools doing in making advanced language proficiency a reality for their students?

To provide critical insight into this question, CAL presents the results of its 2008 nationwide survey of elementary and secondary schools. The report provides an up-to-date portrait of K–12 foreign language education and pinpoints areas that need to be addressed in the future. Survey results are presented in five key areas: amount of foreign language instruction, languages and types of programs offered, curriculum and instruction, teacher certification and training, and effects of education reform. Comparisons are made with the results of CAL's 1987 and 1997 surveys, framing the progress of our efforts toward the goal of multilingualism.

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